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Marching towards Decolonisation: Notes and Reflections

By Ali M. Kassem

In recent years, a decolonial turn in the academy has begun a movement to acknowledge, redress, and subvert the colonial legacy of hegemonic epistemologies and modes of being in the world. As it advances, the need to reorient narratives, concepts and constructs presents itself as a major challenge where the decolonisation of the research on which social scientific knowledge is built appears inevitable. Drawing on insights from a two-day training course, titled 'Decolonisation and Research: Problematics, Challenges, Prospects and the Global South' with Prof Mona Harb from the American University of Beirut and Prof Gurminder Bhambra from the University of Sussex, held at the Sussex School of Law, Politics and Sociology in May 2019*, this piece will offer some reflections and notes for this marching effort.

Over the past two decades, the term 'decolonisation' has become increasingly popularised, resulting in a push cautioning against it becoming 'a metaphor'. In this, the risk of the designation becoming an empty misnomer, and the decolonising effort becoming a diluted trend with no radical profundity, appears substantial. Yet, on the other hand, the realisation that much work across the globe which pursues, and has long pursued, the decolonial agenda, would fail to 'qualify' as decolonial raises the question of decolonialisation becoming an exclusionary institutionalised framework. From paralysing its full radical potential to rendering alliances and coalitions difficult, this would certainly be disadvantageous. Indeed, as different scholars in different geographies mobilise different terms and approaches in the pursuit of a delinking from Eurocentric epistemologies and modes of being the question of naming, of identifying, scholarship presents itself as a pivotal one. Eventually, with a desire for an inclusive *and* undiluted global decolonial agenda, a weighty tension threatens.

On a different level, a key issue for critical scholars in the global south is that of theory. Historically, much of the theorisation used in the westernised academy to understand and analyse happenings outside of the west has revolved around developing a set of analytical tools to make sense of what is claimed as incomprehensible under standard social science theory. In other words, under the dominant narrative of Europe as the Horizon, theorisations which are claimed to be apt at analysing Europe but appear inadequate outside of it are interpreted as a by-product of this outside's lack, and alternative (specific, provincial) theories are henceforth advanced. Under such a narrative, critical scholars are left with one of two choices. The first is to subvert Eurocentric narratives by insisting on the usage of canonical standard theorisations to analyse the various regions of the global south. For example, analysing an organisation such as Hezbollah (as Prof Harb has done) using Bourdieusian and political party theory instead of using cultural studies, sectarianism and political Islam, and insisting on approaching the party as a modern institution, would be illustrative of such an approach.

Yet, such an approach, while efficient in subversion, does not come without its risks. If the standard theorisation in the social sciences has largely been problematic (even for the understanding of Europe itself as it is riddled with 'cover-ups', avowals/disavowals, an ahistorical analysis and misrecognitions) the usage of such a theorisation might disrupt the

academy's narrative but would do little in allowing us to understand, analyse and adequately theorise happenings across the world.

In a world governed by the Eurocentric episteme and its 'global' institutions, the risk of (political) paralysis might here become inevitable. For example, the usage of PTSD as a framework to examine the lived experiences of people living in the world's various conflict-plagued regions, from Palestine to Venezuela, has been mobilised by both activist and scholars to make claims, demands and seek recognition. While the success of such attempts remains debatable, they have certainly offered plenty to the oppressed of our Modern world. In this sense, abandoning these categories, theories and constructs runs the risk of rendering the Global South unintelligible for the Global North and, consequently, the experience of its dwellers unrecognisable by the 'global'. In a time where such a recognition offers both material and non-material advantages, its loss might not be a choice decolonial scholars would want to speedily endorse. For decolonial scholars and activists, as decolonisation moves forward, a series of difficult choices appears inevitable.

At another level, at the level of research projects, and in an increasingly neo-liberalised academia, the question of funding presents itself as the elephant in every room. In the Global South where very little to no local funding exists (under the global order of imperial capital) researchers are left to pursue funding from institutions based in the Global North; from universities and the United Nations to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Extremely threatening, the risks here are as varied as enforcing a (theoretical and political) framing intelligible for westernised scholarship as well as institutional review boards' and ethical committees' (Eurocentric) circumscriptions of research conduct, for example. Yet, the need for decolonial scholars to continue engaging the westernised academy's (funding) institutions appears, at least at this stage, indispensable despite its constraints and hazards. Henceforth, the skill to advance research projects with agendas rooted in the world's various communities – their episteme, needs and concerns – under such conditions and realities appears as one scholars urgently require.

As for methods, while most research methods currently in use have yet to undergo a critical engagement and delinking, the progress being made in trans- and interdisciplinary work, critical methodologies, active and participatory research as well as creative and arts-based methods offers researchers committed to a decolonial agenda a significant toolkit. Drawing on this toolkit remains the (collective) responsibility of those pursuing a decolonised knowledge making. In parallel, a commitment to an agenda of *listening* outside of the pre-established Eurocentric episteme offers itself as a key axis of decolonial fieldwork. Here, the collection of data and its analysis in non-European languages, and the preservation of as much as can be preserved in these languages (using transliterations, for example, with glossaries and definitions instead of translations), holds much promise for the decolonial effort.

Aware that the social sciences have long been characterised by an urge to look for what is missing (instead of looking at what is there), from post-war European democracies to Modernity itself, the decolonisation reflected on in this article offers itself as a means of understanding both East and West, North and South. Decolonisation, as a political and epistemic project in the pursuit of justice, must acknowledge that those who dwell on the borders of Modernity, be they physically in the Global North or in the Global South, those who have experienced the wounding of Coloniality, hold a significant advantage (although in no way is this an exclusive right) in the making (rather than the production) of delinked

knowledge. For decolonisation's advancement, this must be realised and built upon to produce a better, just, knowledge of the world.